

# THE NEW ORGANIST

## MARKING THE HYMNAL

Margot Ann Woolard, AAGO

Hymn playing is one of the most important responsibilities of an organist and one that requires a considerable amount of practice time. Much time and effort can be saved if the organist notes and records pertinent information for each hymn the first time it is learned. The purpose of this article is to indicate what kind of information should be retained and how to develop a system to record it. Initially, this process involves a good deal of time; however, when the hymn is sung again, much of the preparation has already been done and the organist simply reviews the notations in the hymnal.

It is essential that the church or synagogue provide each organist with his or her own copy of the hymnal. If this is not the case in your situation, purchase one so that you will feel free to mark it. Identify the book; then if it is misplaced, it can be easily returned to you.

When learning a new hymn, figure out the technical helps that are necessary to make playing easier. If a passage is particularly difficult to play smoothly, determine the fingering that will produce the desired effect and mark it in very small numbers by the notes or chords. Sometimes the left hand needs to play some of the notes written in the treble clef: bracket these notes as a reminder to take them with the left hand. If you use the pedals for any or all stanzas, mark in pencil which of the pedal notes will be taken by the right or left heel and toe. Place all of this information directly in the hymnal. (Note: look in the index and see if the hymn tune is used with other texts. If the harmonization and key are the same, copy your marks on that hymn as well.)

Musical considerations you might wish to draw attention to include the key, the places for the congregation to breathe, the mood of the text, the registration you will use, and how to introduce the hymn. List the key and which notes are sharp or flat above the hymn. Read the text carefully to find the logical places for the congregation to breathe. These are not always at the end of each line of a hymn and sometimes change from one stanza to another. Mark with a breath mark (') or a slash (/) where you will actually lift your fingers. The text determines the tempo and touch (slower and very legato for subjective hymns, quicker and more articulate for festive ones), as well as the registration you choose. Indicate all this information as well as a key word or words to describe the choice of registration (for example, full; with reeds; 8' and 4' stops, etc.) on the hymnal page.

What portion of the hymn will be used as an introduction? Determine its start and finish and highlight that portion. As a general rule, unless a hymn is very well known, it is wise to include the first line and perhaps the last one in your introduction, ending on a chord that clearly signals the congregation's first pitch.

There is not enough room on the hymnal page to mark everything you might wish to remember. Keep a loose-leaf notebook to record other information, either with the

pages alphabetized according to the hymn tune name or placed in numerical order. In the notebook include the type of introduction (melody alone, all parts as written, soprano and bass together), additional harmonizations of the hymn (does another hymnal have a different setting?), and a list of other arrangements with which you are familiar to provide variety. Also specify preludes and postludes based on the hymn that might be used as service music when that hymn is scheduled to be sung.

Sometimes the congregation does not sing every stanza, or men and women might alternate on the stanzas of a hymn for a particular service. Indicate the plan in your hym-

nal with pencil and, as soon as the service is over, erase the marks.

Once you develop the habit of learning and marking hymns carefully, you will discover that thorough preparation makes hymn playing easier. As an additional benefit, the same hymn will require much less practice in the future.

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